



Bharati Mukherjee

“

I swam to where the river was a sun-gold haze. I kicked and paddled in a rage. Suddenly my fingers scraped the soft waterlogged carcass of a small dog. The body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The moment I touched it, the body broke in two, as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of the broken body, and then the pieces quickly sank. That stench stays with me. I'm twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become.

— Jasmine

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1940
- * Refers to herself as an American author of Bengali-Indian origin
- * *Jasmine* (1989) is her most popularly read novel

Biography

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, to an upper-middle class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, India. The second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal, a chemist, and Bina (Banerjee) Mukherjee, she lived with 40 or 50 relatives until the age of eight. Born into an extraordinarily close-knit and intelligent family, Mukherjee and her sisters were always given ample academic opportunities, and thus have all pursued academic endeavors in their careers and have had the opportunity to receive excellent schooling. In 1947, her father was given a job in England and he brought his family to live there until 1951, which gave Mukherjee an opportunity to develop and perfect her English language skills.

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Mukherjee earned a B.A. with honors from the University of Calcutta in 1959. She and her family then moved to Baroda, India, where she studied for her Master's Degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture, which she acquired in 1961. Having planned to be a writer since childhood, Mukherjee went to the University of Iowa in 1961 to attend the prestigious Writer's Workshop. She planned to study there to earn her Master's of Fine Arts, then return to India to marry a bridegroom of her father's choosing in her class and caste.

However, a lunch break on September 19, 1963, changed that plan, transferring Mukherjee into a split world, a transient with loyalties to two cultures. She impulsively married Clark Blaise, a Canadian writer, in a lawyer's office above a coffee shop after only two weeks of courtship. She received her M.F.A. that same year, then went on to earn her Ph.D. in English and comparative literature from the University of Iowa in 1969.

In 1968, Mukherjee immigrated to Canada with her husband and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. Her 14 years in Canada were some of the hardest of her life, as she found herself discriminated against and treated, as she says, as a member of the "visible minority." She has spoken in many interviews of her difficult life in Canada, a country that she sees as hostile to its immigrants and one that opposes the concept of cultural assimilation. Although those years were challenging, Mukherjee was able to write her first two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975), while working up to professorial status at McGill University in Montreal. During those years she also collected many of the sentiments found in her first collection of short stories, *Darkness* (1985), a collection that in many sections reflects her mood of cultural separation while living in Canada.

Finally fed up with Canada, Mukherjee and her family moved to the United States in 1980, where she was sworn in as a permanent U.S. resident. Continuing to write, in 1986 she was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant. After holding several posts at various colleges and universities, she ultimately settled in 1989 at the University of California-Berkeley.



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Because of the distinctly different experiences she has had throughout life, she has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life. First, as a colonial, then National subject in India. She then led a life of exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada. Finally, she shifted into a celebratory mode as an immigrant, then citizen, in the United States. She now fuses her several lives and backgrounds together with the intention of creating a “new immigrant” literature.

Known for her playful and developed language, Mukherjee rejects the concept of minimalism, which, she says, is “designed to keep anyone out with too much story to tell” (*New York Times Book Review*). Rather, she considers her work a celebration of her emotions, and herself a writer of the Indian diaspora who cherishes the “melting pot” of America. Her main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world. While the characters in all her works are aware of the brutalities and violence that surround them and are often victimized by various forms of social oppression, she generally draws them as survivors. Mukherjee has oft been praised for her understated prose style and her ironic plot developments and witty observations. As a writer, she has a sly eye with which to view the world, and her characters share that quality. Although she is often racially categorized by her thematic focus and cultural origin, she has often said that she strongly opposes the use of hyphenation when discussing her origin, in order to “avoid otherization” and the “self-imposed marginalization that comes with hyphenation.” Rather, she prefers to refer to herself as an American of Bengali-Indian origin.

The Tiger’s Daughter is a fictionalized story drawing from Mukherjee’s own first years of marriage and her return home for a visit to a world unlike the one that lives in her memory. The protagonist, Tara Banerjee, returns to India after marrying an American and faces a different India than the one she remembers leaving. This first novel addresses Mukherjee’s personal difficulties of being caught between two worlds, homes and cultures and is an examination of who she is and where she belongs. Similarly, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, co-authored with her husband, is a shared account of the first trip the couple took to India together after being married. Each offers a different India through their separate journals, and ultimately, the two tell the tale of a relationship that faces the daily difficulties of cultural barriers that have been drawn and separate pasts that linger.



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Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife*, is a more distant story that sees Dimple, a young, naive Indian woman, trying to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life. As a young woman who was raised to be passive, Dimple lacks the inner strength and resources it takes to cope in New York City as the young wife in an arranged marriage. Again in this novel, Mukherjee deals with the complications that come from being thrown between two worlds and the strength and courage it takes to survive and, ultimately, live. *Wife* was often dismissed because its heroine fails to make the transition from one world to another, and was often judged to be "weak." Although both of Mukherjee's first books weave complex tales, they lack the strength of storytelling that her later works are more successful at capturing.

Darkness, her first collection of short stories, focuses on natives of South Asia who crave success and stability, but are burdened by their histories and face the difficulties of prejudice and misunderstanding. This collection was a transitional work for Mukherjee, who was reflecting back on her difficult years in Canada and cherishing the opportunity to establish herself in the United States.

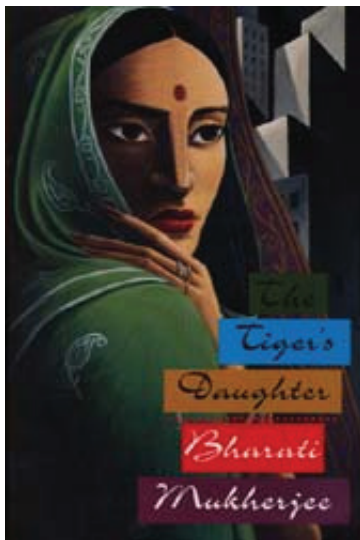
In 1988, Mukherjee had a major public breakthrough that lifted her into the top ranks of all writers. She was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for *The Middleman and Other Stories*. In this collection, Mukherjee becomes a valuable middleman linking disparate worlds. She tells her tales from many perspectives, with a keen eye for the concept of self within a larger society. She wrote this collection in a lighter, more celebratory tone, with characters who are adventurers and explorers, rather than refugees and outcasts, and are a part of a new, changing America.

Jasmine, Mukherjee's most popularly read novel, was generally received enthusiastically, but there was some criticism that it was too short and its plot too contrived to be a really successful work of fiction. It is a novel that stems from an earlier short story from *The Middleman and Other Stories* and was expanded to a story of a young widow who uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life and the image of America. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the title character continually sheds lives to move into other roles, moving further westward while constantly fleeing pieces of her past. In it, Mukherjee rejoices in the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant of her life, because in the third world she faced only despair and loss. What Mukherjee hoped that people would read in the story is not only Jasmine's story and change, but also the story of a changing America.



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While Mukherjee has been received favorably by many critics and academics, she has also faced a good deal of criticism, particularly from East Indian scholars and critics. It has been said that she often represents India in her fiction as a land without hope or a future. She has also been criticized for a tendency to overlook unavoidable barriers of caste, education, gender, race and history in her tales of survivors, particularly within *Jasmine*, giving her characters more opportunities than their social circumstances would realistically allow.

Mukherjee is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California-Berkeley. Her husband, with whom she shares a “literary marriage,” teaches at the University of Iowa and they have two sons together, Bart Anand and Bernard Sudhir. Mukherjee has established herself as a powerful member of the American literary scene, one whose most memorable works reflect her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America. As she said in an interview in the *Massachusetts Review*, “the immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make-up.” And so we are given a writer whose voice tells the tales of her own experiences to demonstrate the changing shape of American society.



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